

Paris Attacks Exacerbated Refugee Crisis

The Islamic State's Nov. 13 terrorist attacks in Paris have further squeezed indigenous Christian ministries serving refugees in the Middle East, as officials in some European countries have called for shutting their doors to Syrians.

None of the terrorists who killed 130 people in Paris have been identified as Syrians, though one had apparently stolen the passport of a Syrian migrant. The Belgian suspected of organizing the operation and five French citizens reportedly involved in the attacks were Muslim extremists from Europe, though they had traveled to Syria, presumably to make contact with Islamic State (ISIS) leaders.

Insecurity following the attacks, combined with reports of ISIS recruiting from among Syrian refugees and infiltrating refugee camps, has led European countries to tighten controls on refugee flows, though the vast majority of migrants are families, women, children and the elderly who are themselves victims of ISIS and other war-related violence.

"The violence we saw in Paris is violence that people in Syria are fleeing," Joel Charny, an official at Inter Action, an umbrella group for aid organizations, recently told National Public Radio. "We're not helping terrorists. We're helping vulnerable people. It's the perpetrators of the violence in Syria that are driving people to flee. Let's not punish the victims."

As word has spread among refugees of greater difficulty in crossing European borders, the Middle Eastern countries that were "already at the breaking point," according to a United Nations official, are seeing their refugee crises expand—as are the ministries providing relief.

"The Paris attack has affected us in Jordan very much," said the director of one ministry serving refugees. "And it has affected the refugees themselves, because now they have lost hope of going to Europe and starting their lives there."

Before the Paris attacks, most Syrian refugees (more than 4 million) had gone to neighboring countries like Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, compared with only 700,000 going to European countries—chiefly Germany, Sweden and Serbia, according to online news site .

While the number of refugees leaving Turkey for Europe has gone down, according to the director of a ministry native to Turkey, the number of refugees fleeing to Turkey has not diminished, especially as Russian airstrikes supposed to be directed at ISIS have driven out more Syrians.

"Those countries in the middle of Europe have closed their doors to receive refugees, and the news is being spread around in the camps here," he said. "So they are choosing to stay in Turkey. Also, now the opportunity to sail by boat to other countries is becoming more difficult for them, due to the agreement between the Turkish and European governments over the past few months, so those choosing to leave Turkey have slowed down considerably."

Refugees who have tried to flee are doubling back, he said, further burdening indigenous ministries that Christian Aid Mission assists. Christian Aid assists five ministries in Turkey as well as 16 in the Middle East providing aid while sharing the love of Christ to refugees and displaced families in Syria.

"This has increased the need for our help, because a number of families sold all their possessions or gave them away, saying, 'We're going to Europe,' but then they were sent back and are now having to find needed possessions again," he said. "This is particularly the case with those who tried to enter Europe

by boat. They may have left from Izmir [in western Turkey], but then returned to the north on the Black Sea, where we are serving them. They need tents, heating devices, and all the other needs for survival.”

Leading churches in Samsun and other sites along the Black Sea, the ministry director said the refugees are also testing the young Christian fellowships, where Arabic-speaking or Kurdish-speaking Syrians have few means to explain that they do not constitute a threat.

“Although [Turkish] brothers and sisters don’t say it openly, they hold back from being friendly to the refugees coming for aid from us,” he said. “One can sense that the refugees themselves are feeling judged and looked over as though they may be affiliated with ISIS and are dangerous. This makes them feel ashamed, when really they want to be connected but can’t make that clear to the church members.”

Many Turks were wary of hiring Syrians or renting apartments to them even before the Paris attacks, and the refugees are even more vulnerable and in need of aid now, he said.

“With your help in sending finances, we are providing the best we can for those who come,” he said. “We will not back down from helping these needy people. And our hope is in the God who turns evil into good, and does miracles to turn the hearts of mankind from terror to searching for God’s goodness. There are people having experienced the terror of ISIS who come to me saying, ‘I want to be a Christian.’”

In Spain, which agreed in September to accept 15,000 Syrian refugees with larger contingents to come next year, the director of a ministry providing relief echoed the Turkish ministry director’s challenges.

“Now they cannot leave Spain to France and Germany, so our job is bigger,” he said. “Also we need prayer, because some Christian leaders decided not to work with them because they

are afraid, but my team is ready to do what is necessary.”